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SUBJECT: Positive reaction to talks; LTTE spokesman's remarks edging away from separatism earn high praise

Refs: (A) Colombo 1743 (C) Bangkok 6597  
- (B) Colombo 1739 (D) Colombo 1736

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Charge d'Affaires.  
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) Summary: Sri Lankans have reacted in a highly positive fashion to the successful conclusion of the first round of talks between the government and the Tamil Tigers. Contacts highlighted as noteworthy the announcements that the two sides would soon meet again, that they would form joint committees on certain issues, and that Muslim leader Hakeem would meet Tiger leader Prabhakaran next month. LTTE spokesman Balasingham's remarks backing away from separatism also reaped praise. With the peace process steadily gaining traction, Sri Lanka is rapidly becoming a changed country. End Summary.

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Positive Reaction to Talks  
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2. (C) The successful outcome of the first round of talks between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has garnered a highly positive reaction in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan TV, radio, and newspapers have been full of reports on the talks, with much comment directed toward the apparently positive atmospherics shared by the two sides at the closing press conference on September 18. In a common reaction from an observer, A.H.M. Fowzie, a senior People's Alliance (PA) MP, told polchief: "Given all that has happened in the past, it was quite remarkable to see how well Peiris (the chief GSL negotiator) and Balasingham (the chief LTTE negotiator) got on."

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Three Major Announcements  
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3. (C) Contacts welcomed what they saw as three major announcements emerging from the talks:

-- More Meetings: The single important announcement was seen as the two sides' agreement to meet three more times in coming months (See Ref A for exact dates).

4. K. Loganathan of the Center for Policy Analysis, a local think-tank, told us that the fact that the two sides had agreed to multiple meetings meant "they were gradually getting subsumed in a process that would be difficult to get out of without repercussions."

-- Joint Bodies: Another important agreement was that the two sides would form joint bodies to look into such issues as humanitarian assistance, as well as the Sri Lankan military's "High Security Zones" in the north and east. Joseph Pararajasingham, a pro-LTTE senior Tamil National Alliance MP, told us that Tamils were enthusiastic about the agreement to form these joint bodies. It indicated that the government was taking seriously the "humanitarian plight" faced by the people in Sri Lanka's north and east, he commented.

-- Muslim/LTTE Meeting: The two sides also agreed that Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader (and GSL Minister) Rauf Hakeem would meet with LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran next month. Such a meeting would be significant, as it would afford Hakeem another opportunity to review strained LTTE-Muslim relations with the LTTE's top leader, according to M.L.A.M. Hizbullah, a senior PA MP. (Note: Hakeem was a member of the government's negotiating team in Thailand. Hakeem and Prabhakaran also met in April.) (Note: There were also unconfirmed press reports that Minister Milinda Moragoda, a key member of the GSL's peace process team, would also meet Prabhakaran next month.)

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LTTE Spokesman seems to nix separatism  
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14. (SBU) LTTE spokesman Balasingham's remarks backing away from separatism also reaped praise. In statements that earned banner headlines in the local press, Balasingham -- responding to repeated questions at the September 18 press conference -- stated:

-- "I wish to impress upon you that the LTTE does not operate with the concept of a separate state. Our demand for a homeland is not for a separate state."

-- "When we use the category or concept of self-determination we mean that the concept entails substantial autonomy or self-government in a homeland or the historical areas where we live. These aspirations can be achieved in one country if we set about (the discussions) correctly."

-- "If our demand for regional autonomy and self-government is rejected and conditions of oppression continue as a last resort our people have no option other than to fight for political independence or statehood."

15. (C) The general view was that Balasingham's remarks were about as far as the LTTE has ever gone in indicating that it would settle for less than an "Eelam" or separate Tamil state in the north and east.

16. Loganathan of the Center for Policy Alternatives told us that he thought Balasingham's remarks were "quite important, as they indicated the LTTE might be willing to work within the 'united Sri Lanka' concept." Even Presidential spokesman Harim Peiris, who is otherwise quite critical of the LTTE, welcomed Balasingham's remarks, commenting that it was a "potentially positive announcement that needs to be studied further."

17. (C) ((Note: There was some skepticism about Balasingham's comments, however. A representative of the radical Janantha Vimukthi Peramuna publicly blasted Balasingham, asserting that "the LTTE is simply making its original demand for separatism in another way." Dayan Jayatilleke, a local press commentator with Sinhalese extremist leanings, was also dubious, accusing "the pro-peace crowd of making a big deal over nothing.")))

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Comment  
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18. (C) The talks seem to have met local expectations in every way. Balasingham's comments, which received so much press coverage, were a decided bonus for the government, strengthening its position in the south vis-a-vis Sinhalese hard-liners. (Note: Balasingham's comments could easily be seen as the LTTE's quid pro quo response to the GSL's recent decision to lift its ban on the LTTE. The GSL had been seeking something in return for its politically risky announcement. It is not clear whether Balasingham cleared his remarks with his boss, Prabhakaran, but it would have been dangerous not to. End Note.)

19. (C) With the peace process steadily gaining traction, Sri Lanka is rapidly becoming a changed country. While the wounds of the nearly 20-year conflict are not even close to healed, Sri Lanka has come a long way very quickly, becoming much less tense and optimistic in the process. The flip side of this is that if expectations are dashed the negative reaction could be a powerful one. End Comment.

20. (U) Minimize considered.

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